

Government delivers 250,000 clear face masks to support people with hearing loss

NHS and care workers will be given clear face masks to help them communicate with people with certain conditions like hearing loss, autism and dementia, the government has announced.

The masks are see-through and have an anti-fogging barrier to ensure the face and mouth are always visible to help doctors, nurses and carers communicate better with their patients.

With around 12 million people in the UK thought to have hearing loss, the masks will be invaluable for people who need to lip-read to communicate during the ongoing response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond.

The masks will also help those who rely on facial expressions to support communication. For example, people with learning disabilities, autism or dementia, or foreign language speakers and their interpreters.

The new deal with US-based company ClearMask will see 250,000 masks delivered to NHS trusts and social care providers across the UK over the next few weeks.

Minister for Care Helen Whately said:

Everyone using our remarkable health and care system deserves the best care possible and communication is a vital part of that.

This pandemic has posed numerous challenges to the sector, so we are always on the hunt for simple solutions to support those giving and receiving care.

The introduction of clear face masks will help overcome some of the difficulties carers wearing PPE are facing communicating with people who rely on lip-reading. If this proves a success I look forward to increasing the supply to make sure whenever a clear mask is needed, there is one available.

This applies across the whole of the UK and the government is working with the devolved administrations on allocations of the masks. The first delivery has already been distributed to NHS trusts, with further deliveries over the next couple of weeks.

Social care providers will also have access to the masks through a new pilot system with Local Resilience Forums.

The Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England and Improvement will continue to work closely with suppliers on future orders based on demand.

The clear masks have met the government's strict safety standards and will be rolled out to frontline workers over the next few weeks.

The government has delivered over 3 billion pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE) to the frontline and are working with around 130 new companies, including Royal Mint, Honeywell, Amazon and Royal Mail, to rapidly manufacture, source or distribute PPE at scale and pace.

This follows a national and international call to arms in April asking industry to channel their manufacturing power into making PPE for the health and care sector.

Roger Wicks, Director of Policy and Campaigns at Action on Hearing Loss, said:

We welcome the procurement of clear face masks, which has the potential to improve the accessibility of health and social care services for those who rely on seeing facial expressions and lip-reading to communicate, including people who are deaf or have hearing loss.

Since the outbreak of coronavirus, people have told us continually that they are worried about communicating in health and social care settings where face masks are now in constant use. We know that clear masks have the ability to reduce barriers for both patients and staff across the NHS and social care services.

People need to understand the information and instructions that they are given by health and care professionals: ineffective communication and misunderstandings have the potential to harm the health and wellbeing of people with hearing loss.

We hope that different services across the NHS and social care are able to access clear masks and effectively match them to patient need. It will also be important that these masks are complemented by effective communication tips and deaf awareness among staff to ensure that people with hearing loss get the support they need.

Professor Andrew Goddard, Royal College of Physicians President, said:

The necessary use of face masks to protect staff and patients has made communication difficult. It's particularly true for clinicians and patients who are deaf or have a hearing loss and rely on being able to read lips.

Clear communication is always important, but particularly in healthcare. So we're pleased these masks are going to be available

very soon.

Of course, lip-reading doesn't work for everyone, nor is it everyone's first choice. It's important that all NHS employers and services find out what someone's communication needs are and meet them, in line with the Accessible Information Standard.

Sarah White, Head of Policy and Campaigns at national disability charity Sense, said:

The last few months have been particularly hard on disabled people and a part of this are the barriers that PPE brings to many of them in terms of their communication. While PPE is of course vital in keeping everyone safe during this pandemic, many disabled people rely on lip-reading and facial expression to communicate, which means masks present themselves as a big challenge.

We've therefore been delighted to work with the Department of Health and Social Care and other organisations to raise awareness of this issue and we welcome the introduction of clear masks for use in frontline health and social care services, which will benefit millions of disabled people in this country.

While clear masks won't work for everyone and they can still present a challenge to some people, it certainly is a great first step which should be part of a clear and cohesive strategy for how we ensure that health and care services remain clinically safe at the same time as enabling disabled people to communicate and feel safe.

Allysa Dittmar, President of ClearMask, said:

As a company that was started in 2017 in a response to the need for improved, visual communication for the deaf and hard of hearing community, we immediately understood the critical need for such see-through, transparent masks during this pandemic for many different groups of people.

We were proud to help answer the call for critical PPE for the NHS, and this partnership is a reflection of the hard work and dedication of many individuals involved in the push for better accessibility and care during this time.